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AUTHOR Pfau, Michael
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ABSTRACT

Noting the enormous potential of political debates to serve both the candidates and the public, this paper argues that debate procedure and format should be improved so as to achieve a more harmonious relationship between debate and politics. The first section of the paper examines the role and impact of debates in contemporary political campaigns, specifically the presendential campaigns of 1976 and 1980. The second section argues that debate could contribute more to politics, and blames flaws in procedure and format for its failure to do so. Noting that most political debates resemble press conferences more than debates, this section reviews the series of debates held in South Dakota in 1980 known as "Election 80," which sought to implement and test procedure and format in terms of specific criteria. The third section of the paper sets forth the following recommendations for improving political debate procedure and format: (1) the issue agendas used in political debates should be the public's and the candidates', not the media's; (2) questions to the candidates by the media should be phrased simply and clearly; (3)candidates should be told the topics in advance and should be allowed to use notes and other materials; and (4)the role the media play in political debates must be substantially altered. (FL)

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POLITICAL DEBATE FORMATS: THE NEXT STEP

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Michael Pfau
Box H-3000
Augustana College
Sioux Falls, SD 57197

Speech Communication Association Convention
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Political debates have become, in the words of New York Times columnist Tom Wicker, "a standard feature of the media politics by which we now elect Presidents."[1] Each of the last two presidential campaigns have featured debates. Furthermore, James Karayn reported that 176 of the 252 members of Congress who responded to a 1977 poll said that they had debated their opponents during the last election campaign.[2] The increasing use of political debates carries enormous--but as yet untapped--potential.

This paper will briefly examine the role and impact of debates in contemporary political campaigns. However, the primary purpose of this paper is to make specific recommendations with regard to those considerations of procedure and format which hold the key to unlocking the full potential of political argument in the debate setting. This Action Caucus has previously argued that, given the enormous potential of political debates to serve both the candidates and the public, procedure and format should be improved so as to achieve a more harmonious marriage between debate and politics. The 1980 South Dakota "Election 80" experiment with political debate formats sought to implement and test procedure and format in terms of specific criteria. The results verified that procedure and format do make a difference. With the format start of the 1984 political campaign just ahead, it is appropriate for this Action Caucus to take the next step which involves specific recommendations

regarding procedure and format.

Role and Impact

The public expects that political debates will provide useful information about the candidates and their positions. O'Keefe and Mendelsohn studied Akron, Ohio, voters before and after the 1976 presidential debates. Voters expressed high expectations in anticipation of the debates. Ninety percent thought that learning the candidates' positions on the issues was "very important."[3] Moreover, many were looking for help in deciding which of the two candidates to vote for. "A surprising 65 percent of the viewers thought it likely that watching the debate would indeed influence their choice of a candidate in one way or another. A full one-fourth of them answered that it was 'very likely' that they would be influenced."[4]

When the dust had settled on the 1976 presidential debates, viewers expressed disappointment. People did learn from the debates, but not nearly as much as they thought they would. In Akron, 21 percent of respondents felt they had learned something new and important about issues from the debates; however, 60 percent indicated that it was difficult to get a true picture of the candidates from the debates.[5] A 1976 Roper Poll found that only 14 percent of viewers considered the debates to be very informative.[6]

Steven Chaffee maintained that the chief culprit is the

press. He claimed that the use of post-debate critiques by the press was largely responsible for the large disparity between viewer expectations and results.[7] Indeed, a study by G. E. Lang and K. Lang of the 1976 debates revealed a substantial difference between immediate and delayed (next day) reactions. Prior to the news media's commentary, viewer reactions were much more positive.[8] It appears that the news media bears primary responsibility for the deterioration of viewer reaction. The news media tends to overemphasize "horse race" considerations; it dwells on who has won and why. This results in an underemphasis on candidate qualifications and issue stances. Jeff Greenfield chided the media's post-debate critiques in 1980, charging that, "...no one was left to consider the prospect that large numbers of undecided Americans might be listening to the arguments the candidates were making."[9]

Despite these shortcomings, the data suggests that the public does benefit from political debates. It seems clear that viewers gain information about issue positions from debates. Chaffee's 1976 study of 164 Wisconsin voters over a three-month period revealed that the proportion of "don't knows" on four key issues generally declined as the election approached, but fell sharply during the week following each presidential debate.[10] A 1976 study by Becker, Sobowale, Cobbey and Eyal of 1300 Syracuse, New York, voters found that viewers showed "significant gains" in knowledge about issue positions.[11] A study by Baker and Norpoth

of the 1972 Electoral debates in West Germany reported that the debates produced a "direct effect" on the quality of information that the population had about the candidates' positions on important issues.[12]

Furthermore, most recent data indicates that political debates do make an important difference in election outcomes. This is especially true in elections which feature a large undecided block, a characteristic of both the 1976 and 1980 presidential contests. Chaffee's Wisconsin study found that 31 percent of voters were undecided in the week prior to the debates.[13] He concluded that, "...in elections where large numbers of such voters are present, the heavy flow of information created by the debates can be influential."[14] Indeed, Jimmy Carter attributed the 1976 reversal in public opinion polls--and his victory--to his debates with Gerald Ford.[15] A recent study found that political debates exert nearly twice the impact on local races as compared to presidential contests.[16]

In 1980 the proportion of undecided and weakly aligned voters was unusually large. This, coupled with the fact that only one debate was held, and that it occurred late in the campaign, set the stage for the Carter and Reagan debate to play a decisive role in the outcome of the election. And it did! A study by the Institute for Social Inquiry at the University of Connecticut of that state's voters just before and after the Carter and Reagan debate concluded that the debates "produced an extraordinary shift" in the public's perception--favoring

candidate Reagan.[17] Most critically, undecided and independent voters perceived Reagan to be the decisive winner of the debate.

Considerations of Format

Debate could contribute much more to politics. Lloyd Bitzer and Theodore Rueter articulated this potential as follows: "The free expression of ideas, so cherished by Americans, must be accompanied by the practice of debate...If guided by rules of evidence and codes of fairness, debate sifts truth from error and moves us closer to (what Walter Lippman refers to as) 'moral and political truth'."[18] Yet, despite this potential, debate has yet to contribute fully to politics. The fault lies with procedure and format, which bear a closer resemblance to the traditional press conference than to what Bitzer and Rueter term, "genuine debate." The press conference is, of course, an important and useful institution. But, it does not--and can not--facilitate "genuine debate" between political candidates. To date, debate has taken a "bum rap" in its political application. Most of the exchanges aren't debates; yet, they are criticized as if they were debates.

This call for revision in procedure and format has been issued repeatedly. Norman Lear of the Task Force on Televised Presidential Debates concluded that, "I believe that a format can be developed for the discussion of important issues wherein partisans on both sides meet each other head-on, moderated by an

individual whose sole purpose is to steer the debate, allowing no participant to avoid a question or a challenge."[19] In classic understatement Bitzer and Rueter posed the following challenge: "Human ingenuity surely can devise methods and formats of...debate calculated to serve the public interest, while at the same time allowing the candidates to advance their causes."[20]

The 1980 South Dakota "Election 80" series sought to implement and test procedure and format in terms of specific criteria. I assisted the Sioux Falls area press association in planning and implementing televised political debates involving the candidates for the first and second district congressional races and for the United States Senate. A suggested a criteria--and format--to maximize the promise of political debates. The Sioux Falls Area Press Association, dissatisfied with past political debates, accepted my proposal without amendment. It was used in three televised debates which were aired on successive Wednesdays during the month of October.

South Dakota Public Television aired three 60-minute programs. The programs were entitled, "Election 80." Each program began with introductory statements by each of the candidates; then each program featured a debate between the candidates; the debate was followed by a press conference, during which a panel of South Dakota journalists questioned the candidates; finally each program concluded with closing statements by each of the candidates.

An attempt was made to evaluate the "Election 80" series format in comparison with the format used in the 1980 Carter and Reagan debate in terms of specific criteria. A questionnaire was submitted to the 16 journalists, who planned or participated in the press phase of the program, and to the six candidates, who debated and then answered the questions from the press. The survey contained both closed- and open-ended questions. The closed-ended questions compared the relative effectiveness of the "Election 80" debate format and the Carter and Reagan debate format. The open-ended questions asked respondents to comment with regard to the format or questions used in the "Election 80" televised debates.[21] The results of this study indicated that the procedure and format of the "Election 80" series were more effective than the procedure and format of the Carter and Reagan debate in promoting matched agendas, intelligent clash, and appropriately directed clash.[22]

Specific Recommendations

Susan Hellweg concluded her comprehensive state-of-the-art review of political debate formats with a caveat that, "The goal is not to find a perfect format for political campaign debates, but rather to develop appropriate and productive formats for different campaign situations."[23] I concur. However, debates constitute a unique forum for political argument. That forum minimally requires matched agendas, intelligent clash, and appropriately directed clash. Furthermore, we know enough about

political debates to enable us to identify those features of procedure and format which promote--and hinder--these objectives. Thus, I believe that the time is ripe for the next step. That step involves the Action Caucus' endorsement of specific recommendations regarding procedure and format.

RECOMMENDATION ONE

The first recommendation is that the issue agendas used in political debates should be the public's and the candidates'.

Three possible issue agendas might be used in political debates: the journalist's, the candidates', and/or the public's. The three agendas, however, often conflict. Most past political debates have virtually ignored the public's agenda. A Cleveland State study of the 1960 and 1976 presidential debates found that, on balance, participants in those debates spent only 5 to 10 percent of the total time available addressing issues which were "on the public's mind."[24] In 1976, data provided by the University of Michigan Survey Research Center identified unemployment and inflation as the two dominant issues on the public's mind at the time of the debates. Yet, Cleveland State University researchers, Marilyn Jackson-Beeck and Robert G. Meadow, found that a mere three percent of the journalist's questions concerned inflation, while only 11 percent dealt with unemployment."[25]

Austin Ranney hinted at the importance of agendas when he

concluded that, "The topics which are being discussed are just as much a part of a debate as the words which the candidates speak."[26] A political debate ought to match--to the extent possible--the agendas of the candidates and the public.

This is not to suggest that the press abrogate its traditional agenda-setting role. To the contrary, it seems clear that the press is the primary source of the public's issue agenda. The press, prior to the debates, has already influenced the public's issue agenda.

The data are clear, however, that in past political debates press panelists did not even reflect the media's agenda in their questioning of the candidates. A study of the 1976 Carter and Ford debates by Linda S. Swanson and David L. Swanson of the University of Illinois revealed that the agenda of the debates (as determined by the questions that were asked) and the agenda of the news media at the time of the debates correlated at only 0.22.[27] In short, the journalists' questions have virtually ignored the public's agenda (at least in 1960 and 1976), and have even failed to properly reflect the media's agenda (in 1976).

The issue agendas used in political debates should be the public's and the candidates'. Issues must be selected which are on the public's mind and which reflect important issue differences between the candidates. The "Election 80" series incorporated specific procedures in order to insure that the

issue agendas used in political debates matched the public's and the candidates' as closely as possible.[28] I endorse the efficacy of the following procedures. First, timely public opinion polls should be conducted in order to determine which issues are on the public's mind. Second, each candidate's position papers should be examined to ascertain which of salient issues also reflect important issue differences between the candidates. And third, a limited number of issues should be addressed during a single debate.

RECOMMENDATION TWO

Questions which the candidates are to answer must be phrased simply and clearly. This recommendation is designed to promote clash. Clash is the most essential characteristic of debate.

This has been a recurrent problem in past political debates. Bitzer and Rueter reported that in the 1976 Carter and Ford debates one-fourth of the questions were multiple; yet, only 16 percent of the multiple questions were answered "fully or completely in original or followup speeches."[29] In addition, in the third debate a total of 13 questions exceeded 30 seconds in length (of the 14 original questions, 12 exceeded 30 seconds).[30] In short, most of the questions asked in the 1976 presidential debates were far too complex and too long. Susan Hellweg's examination of the 1980 Carter and Reagan debate detected a similar problem. She concluded that, "...panelists were unable

to resist the temptation to formulate multiple questions within the framework of single questions."[31] It is a small wonder that candidates in past presidential debates have failed to succinctly answer the journalists' questions.

The "Election 80" study results verified that the use of questions which are simple and clear insures clash by encouraging candidates to answer the questions put to them--and to remain on the topic.[32] This has posed a serious problem in past political debates. The Cleveland State University study cited previously found that, in the 1960 presidential debates, Kennedy was able to stay on the topic embodied in the question only 34 percent of the time; Nixon a mere 27 percent of the time.[33] The same study reported that, while in 1976 the candidates fared better, they still strayed from the topic significantly. In 1976 Carter stayed on the topic 46 percent of the time; Ford a robust 62 percent of the time.[34]

The 1980 presidential debate featured more clash than its predecessors. One analysis of the debate by Diana Prentice, Janet Larsen and Matthew Sobnowsky discovered that clash significantly increased during the second phase of the debate; that portion replaced press follow-up questions with candidate rebuttal speeches and summary comments.[35] However, the clash was difficult to follow as a result of the intricacies of the format.

These findings are important--and discouraging. Clash is the essence of genuine debate. Yet, clash has been

conspicuously absent and/or difficult to track in past political debates.

RECOMMENDATION THREE

Candidates should be told the topics in advance and should be allowed to use notes and materials.

Procedure and format for political debates ought to encourage participants to respond logically and factually. This too is a fundamental characteristic of debate. Unfortunately, if candidates cannot use notes and materials the substantive dimension of the exchange suffers. This occurred during the 1976 presidential debates. Candidates received no prior notice of the topics to be discussed. In addition, candidates were prohibited from using notes. As a result, virtually all standards of logic and evidence were violated by the candidates. Bitzer and Rueter found that 226 factual, interpretive and logical errors were committed by the candidates during the 1976 debates (155 by Ford and 79 by Carter).[36]

Candidates should be allowed notes and materials. Candidates cannot be expected to be completely accurate in using facts and figures if they must cite them from memory. Yet, factual accountability is a must in a debate (too many candidates for public office in the United States misuse facts and figures). The candidates must be allowed to bring--and to use--notes and materials on the topics which are scheduled to be debated. Only

then can the candidate be held fully accountable for factual misrepresentations.

In addition, candidates should be told the topics--or areas--in advance of the debate. There is no good reason for keeping the candidates in the dark concerning the subjects to be probed during the debate. Debate is not a vehicle to test the candidate's ability at impromptu speech. Rather, debate should afford an opportunity to learn the candidate's position on an issue and its superiority or inferiority when compared to the other candidate's position. Thus, once the agenda has been determined, the candidates should be informed of the subjects which will be the focus of the debate.

RECOMMENDATION FOUR

The role that the press plays in political debates must be substantially altered.

Political debates should be between the candidates--not between journalists and candidates. Unfortunately, political debates to date have pitted candidates against the press. For example, Bitzer and Rueter found that in the 1976 Carter and Ford debates: more than half the questions contained arguments; 14 of the 63 questions contained an attitude of "omniscience" (talked down to the candidates); 41 of the 63 questions were considered "hostile" to the candidates; and seven of the nine panelists engaged in direct refutation of the candidates in

posing their questions.[37]

The press, of course, should conform to its proper adversarial role. However, political debates work best when the candidates are allowed to assume that role for themselves (that is, after all, the nature of debate). The 1976 debates between the journalists and the candidates produced predictable results: most of the candidates' remarks were directed to the panelists, and not to the opposing candidate. This ultimately worked to Ford's disadvantage as the debates wore on. For example, according to Bitzer and Rueter: in debate one, of Carter's 41 units (response segments), 25 were directed to the panel and 16 to Ford; of Ford's 32 units, 19 were directed to the panel and 13 to Carter. By the third debate, however, Ford found himself under increasing attack from the panelists. In debate three, of Carter's 44 units, 22 were directed to the panelists and 22 to Ford; of Ford's 29 units, 24 were directed to the panel and 5 to Carter.[38] This prompted Bitzer and Rueter to conclude: "Had we known before the third debate that the panel's questions would be so hostile to Ford in both substance and in tone, and had other factors in the debate remained constant, then we should have been able to predict the following outcomes with a strong degree of probability: (1) Ford would need to debate the panel--he did; (2) Carter would win--he did; and (3) the panel would play a large role in determining the outcome of the debate--which it did."[39]

Political debates should pit one candidate against the other on the key issues of the campaign. This necessitates that the role which the press plays in political debates must be substantially altered. The experimental format in South Dakota employed a compartmentalized approach. The debate phase of the program constituted two-thirds of the format. During this phase a moderator posed the questions to the candidates who debated each other on each question without interruption. Journalists, however, played an important role in the format. The traditional press conference took place during the remaining period. During this phase journalists questioned the candidates about content raised during the debate. Thus, the candidates debated; and then, the journalists asked questions. The "Election 80" study found that both candidates and journalists expressed satisfaction with the experimental format.[40]

There is additional evidence to bolster the claim that the American public wants more direct clash in political debates. Public opinion surveys which were completed following the 1976 Carter and Ford presidential debates found that, of those expressing an opinion, most preferred a more direct exchange of views between opposing candidates.[41]

Summary

The procedures and formats which are used in political debates do make a difference. Some features facilitate

argument; others do not. The Action Caucus has studied and debated the relative merits and impacts of alternative debate formats. The next step is to make specific recommendations. There is much at stake and it is time to encourage the adoption of procedure and format which optimize the marriage between debate and politics, thus serving both the candidates and the public. As Lee Hannah, who negotiated the 1980 Carter and Reagan debate on behalf of the League of Women Voters, concluded, "...debate is such a powerful instrument in molding public opinion that it is in need of constant refinement."[42]

NOTES

[1]Tom Wicker, "In the Nation: Negative on Debates," New York Times, June 8, 1980, p. 19E, in Kurt Ritter, "Presidential Campaign Debating: Emerging Trends," a paper presented at the Speech Communication Association annual convention in Louisville, Kentucky, November 5, 1982, p. 1

[2]"A Poll of Congress by the Campaign '78 Debate Survey Project for the Aspen Institute," September 1977; Jim Karayn, project director, in The Past and Future of Presidential Debates, ed. by Austin Ranney (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1979), p. 167.

[3]Garrett J. O'Keefe and Harold Mendelsohn, "Media Influences and Their Anticipation," in The Great Debates: Carter vs. Ford 1976, ed. by Sidney Kraus (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1979), p. 409.

[4]Ibid., p. 408.

[5]Ibid., pp. 410-411.

[6]PBS/Roper polls press releases, in Steven H. Chaffee, "Presidential Debates--Are They Helpful to Voters?" Communication Monographs, Volume 45 (November 1978), p. 333.

[7]Chaffee, Ibid.

[8]Gladys Engel Lang and Kurt Lang with the assistance of John Stensrud, "Making the Least of It? Television Coverage of the Audio Gap," in The Great Debates: Carter Vs. Ford 1976, ed. by Kraus, pp. 158-174.

[9]Jeff Greenfield, The Real Campaign: How the Media Missed the Story of the 1980 Campaign (New York City: Summit Books, 1982), p. 246.

[10]Chaffee, "Presidential Debates--Are They Helpful to Voters," pp. 334-335.

[11] Lee B. Becker, Idowu A. Sobowale, Robin E. Cobbey, and Chaim H. Eyal, "Debates' Effects on Voters' Understanding of Candidates and Issues," in The Presidential Debates: Media, Electoral, and Policy Perspectives, ed. by George F. Bishop, Robert G. Meadow, and Marilyn Jackson-Beeck (New York City: Praeger Publishers, 1978), pp. 126-139.

[12]Kendall L. Baker and Helmut Norpoth, "Candidates on Television: The 1972 Electoral Debates in West Germany," Public Opinion Quarterly, Volume 45 (1981), pp. 329-345.

[13]Chaffee, "Presidential Debates--Are They Helpful to Voters," p. 330, n. 1.

[14]Steven H. Chaffee and Sun Yuel Choe, "Time of Decision and Media Use during the Ford-Carter Campaign," Public Opinion Quarterly, Volume 44 (1980), pp. 52-69.

[15]Stepehen Lesher with Patrick Caddell and Gerald Rafshoon, "Did the Debates Help Jimmy Carter?" A paper prepared for the American Enterprise Institite Conference on the Future of Presidential Debates, Washington, D.C., October, 1977. In Report of the Twentieth Century Fund Task Force on Televised Presidential Debates, With the Nation Watching (Lexington, Massachusetts: D.C. Heath and Company, 1979), p. 39.

[16]Allen Lichtenstein, "Differences in Impact Between Local and National Televised Political Candidates' Debates," The Western Journal of Speech Communication, Volume 46 (Summer 1982), pp. 291-298.

[17]Survey by the Institute for Social Inquiry, University of Connecticut, in "Debating the Debate (Opinion Roundup section)," Public Opinion, December/January 1981, p. 35.

[18]Lloyd Bitzer and Theodore Rueter, Carter Vs. Ford: The Counterfeit Debates of 1976 (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1980), p. 3.

[19]Report of the Twentieth Century Fund Task Force on Televised Presidential Debates, With the Nation Watching, p. 15.

[20]Bitzer and Rueter, Carter Vs. Ford, p. 4.

[21]Michael Pfau, "Criteria and Format To Optimize Political Debates: An Analysis of South Dakota's 'Election 80' Series," Journal of the American Forensic Association, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Winter 1983), in press.

[22]Ibid.

[23]Susan A. Hellweg, "Political Debate Formats: A State-of-the-Art Review," paper presented at the Speech Communication Association annual convention in Louisville, Kentucky, November 5, 1982, p. 18.

[24]"Presidential Debates: The Gap Between Issues and Answers," Psychology Today, January 1980, p. 20.

[25]Ibid.

[26]Ranney, Past and Future of Presidential Debates, editor's preface.

[27]Linda L. Swanson and David L. Swanson, "The Agenda-Setting Function of the First Ford-Carter Debate," Communication Monographs, Volume 45 (November 1978), p. 351.

[28]Neither the closed-ended ended nor the open-ended section of the "Election 80" questionnaire indicated a significant difference between the format used in the three South Dakotas debates versus the format used in the Carter and Reagan debate on the criterion of matched agendas. I can only speculate concerning possible reasons for this finding. It is quite possible that the 1980 Carter and Reagan debate bested past presidential debates in addressing those issues on the public's mind. It is also possible that the journalist respondents, who comprised three-fourths of the "Election 80" questionnaire survey, were either reluctant to concede that their questions poorly reflected the public's agenda in the three South Dakota races, or that they were unaware of the public's agenda in those races.

[29]Bitzer and Rueter, Carter Vs. Ford, pp. 54 & 57.

[30]Ibid., p. 57.

[31]Hellweg, "Political Debate Formats," p. 12.

[32]Pfau, "Criteria and Format to Optimize Political Debates."

[33]Psychology Today, January 1980, p. 20.

[34]Ibid.

[35]Diana B. Prentice, Janet K. Larsen, and Matthew J. Sobnosky, "The Carter Reagan Debate: A Comparison of the Clash in the Dual Format," paper presented at the Speech Communication Association annual convention in Anaheim, California, November 15, 1981.

[36]Bitzer and Rueter, Carter Vs. Ford, p. 173.

[37]Ibid., pp. 60, 62, 63, and 65.

[38]Ibid., p. 115.

[39]Ibid., p. 75.

[40]Pfau, "Criteria and Format to Optimize Political Debates."

[41]Jim Karayn, "Presidential Debates--A Plan for the Future," paper presented for the American Enterprise Institute Conference on the Future of Presidential Debates, Washington, D.C., October 1977; later retitled, "The Case for Permanent Presidential Debates," p. 15.

[42]Lee Hannah, "An Insider's View of the Debates," Manhattan Weekend, Daily News, November 15, 1980, p. 3.